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Juvenile Marriages, Child-Brides and Infant Mortality Among Serbian Gypsies*

Gypsies/Roma make up the largest minority in Europe. Roma communities tend to be segregated and characterized by poverty, unemployment, poor education, and poor quality housing. So far, the European strategy for Gypsy/Roma integration proved insufficient because it fails to account to the normative nature of the isolationist and ethnocentric nature of certain elements of Gypsy culture, as well as the deep and mutual distrust between Gypsies and non-Gypsies within European countries. In Serbia, the Gypsy population tends to suffer disproportionately from higher rates of poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, and disease. At the same time, the Serbian Gypsy women average an infant mortality rate between 10–20%. For most of these girls/women, endogamous, arranged marriages are negotiated at an early age, usually without their consent. Among these women, a certain level of infant mortality is “expected”, following an under-investment in some children manifested in their care, feeding, and the response to their illnesses. These juvenile arranged marriages, subsequent reproduction and child mortality are culturally self-sufficient and hence pose a challenge for international human rights: while many Gypsy girls/women are being denied the right to choose whom and when to marry, the Gypsy community itself openly accepts juvenile arranged marriage as a preservation strategy and means of cultural, economic, and societal maintenance and independence. Although efforts to improve education, health, living conditions, encourage employment and development opportunities for Gypsies/Roma are essential, these objectives cannot be attained without directing the changes needed within Gypsy/Roma culture itself. The initial point for change must come

Key words:

Gypsies, child mortality, juvenile marriage, Serbia

* This paper is the result of project *Interdisciplinary Research of Serbian Cultural and Linguistic Heritage; Creation of Multimedial Internet Portal 'The Lexicon of Serbian Culture'* (No 47016), granted by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic Serbia.

from an increased sense of responsibility among the Gypsies themselves.

Introduction

The Roma/Gypsies are a diverse population of South Asian stock who migrated to Europe from northwest India between the 9th and 14th centuries (Fraser 1992). Roma/Gypsies make up the largest minority in Europe, and at the same time, they are a subject to constant discrimination and endure poor socio-economic conditions.

Throughout Europe, Roma/Gypsies experience social exclusion, a lower life expectancy (10 to 15 years lower than the European average), have a higher infant mortality rate, live in substandard conditions, and have an unemployment rate of up to 80 percent (UNDP 2006). At present, the current size of the European Gypsy population is around 8 million and rising, which is equivalent to that of an average European country (Save the Children 2001). In fact, Roma/Gypsy communities are scattered throughout Europe—usually in relatively small, isolated, ghetto-like communities near villages and cities. An estimated 2.5 million speak a language remotely related to Romani, and, even within that group, there are many different dialects with only basic similarities; the remaining 8 to 10 million speak the language of their host countries (Crowe 1996, Fraser 1992).

Many Gypsies tend to stay apart from the mainstream of society by choice. Among the general Gypsy population in Europe, for example, education and technology are not significant factors within the culture and are not traditionally considered important. A noted example is their illiteracy: even when provided with a schooling system in their own language, many Gypsies fail to complete even a basic education (Ringold 2001, Save the Children 2001). Hence, Gypsies are perhaps the most segregated ethnic group in Europe. How to integrate them into the modern European society remains an ongoing concern (Uzunova 2010). In spite that multiple entities such as national government, various institutions, Gypsy community and activists try to apply diverse approach toward improving the situation of Gypsies in Europe, their efforts are ineffective to a great extent, due to the social antagonism between Gypsies and non Gypsies and the segregate and ethnocentric disposition of particular elements of Gypsy culture.

Gypsies in Serbia

The first written document referring to Gypsies in Serbia dates from 1348, when Stefan Dušan, the Emperor of the Serbs and Greeks presented some Gypsy slaves to the monastery of Prizren, in Kosovo (Djordjević 1924). In Serbia, as in other South-Slavic countries areas under the Turkish rule, Gypsies constituted a separate ethnic group: they lived apart in mahalas, in towns, or in isolated village areas, and had to pay a special “gypsy” taxes to the Turks (Vukanović 1983). In the

past, the extended family was their social unit, and the occupational niches they filled contributed to the Serbian economy. In Serbia, their traditional occupations made them a part of the economy, which benefited both Gypsies and non-Gypsies. The traditional Gypsy occupations include crafts like trough-making, basket-making, spoon-making, blacksmithing, ironsmithing and entertaining (music). Although they made a contribution to the agriculturally based Serbian economy, they were despised by the Serbian peasantry; craftsmen in general were held to be in a low social position, always occupying an isolated and the lowest status in the society (Djordjević 1924). In time, Gypsy artisan products became indispensable, especially in Serbian low land areas, where they could make a living by selling their crafts. In the past, some intermarriage occurred between the Gypsies and Serbs, especially in places where Gypsies became fully assimilated with the local culture. The incidence of intermarriage, however, was low, and to this day, Gypsies have remained a separate ethnic group (Čvorović 2004).

Today, an official estimate of Serbia's true Gypsies range between 360,000-500,000, compared to 7,478,820. Serbs (Save the Children 2001). Gypsy demographic characteristics greatly differ from those of the population as a whole: they have high birth rates and death rates well above the average and high infant mortality (Stanković 1992, Čvorović 2004). Gypsy communities tend to be segregated and characterized by poverty, unemployment, poor education, and poor quality housing. In Serbia, Gypsies form a complex mixture of groups. In fact, there are a quite few subgroups of Gypsies in Serbia. Some of them lost the Romani language and their mother tongue is now Serbian. There are different forms of Romani depending on which group the Gypsy belongs to. Interaction between different groups is limited, and the form of Romani spoken is an important means of distinguishing between groups (Čvorović 2004). Furthermore, Gypsies have always come under several appellations and names. Each group represents a historical and originally to a certain extent, localized entity (Fraser 1992). Gypsies always depended on the needs and contacts with their host countries, as a source of their livelihood; many times Gypsies adopted their hosts' culture in response to the different requirements of their social and environmental surroundings. The result is the great diversity of Gypsy tribes and the lack of identity as of an integrated ethnic group. Therefore, Gypsy culture in general is extremely diverse and difficult to pinpoint. Their ethnicity is also disputed and complex issue, coming from the fact that most Gypsies do not regard themselves as members of a cohesive group, but identify instead with the subgroup to which they belong (Čvorović 2006). Within these subgroups, language and religion also remain diverse; the religion which a Gypsy tribe or ethnicity might hold on is to depend on location and circumstances. A significant characteristic of Gypsies as a group is their adaptability to religious and political changes. Their religious and political standings depended always on the current political climate. For example, some contemporary Christian Gypsies are ex-Muslims. Until very recently, the characteristic of all groups was that they did not mix up with each other—there appeared to be a strongly emphasized antagonism among the groups. A system that divides these groups, much like a caste system, still exists in some parts of Serbia today. In the past, with respect to other Gypsies, allowable marriage choices were largely restricted. Females in particular, were expected to marry someone

within their particular tribe and most obeyed the rule by marrying within their group.

Literacy, that is, illiteracy, represents a special problem for the Gypsy ethnic group. According to the 1981 census data of former Yugoslavia, the Gypsy group showed elementary illiteracy. For example, the number of Gypsies without elementary school was 80%; only 16.8% finished obligatory elementary schooling; only 4.1% finished high school, and only 0.2% college or university. The percentage of illiterate male Gypsies was 20.8%, and for females, the percentage was extremely high – 48% (Stanković 1996). A survey from 2001, by a United Kingdom non-government organization Save the Children., found that the situation did not change much for the past twenty years: 62% of Gypsies had not completed primary education, and over a third had no schooling (Save the Children 2001). Also, a large number of Gypsy girls marry at 13–16, prompting school drop-out. According to the latest survey, around 80 % of the Roma/Gypsy population in Serbia is functionally illiterate, while only 8% has finished elementary school (Beta, October 14, 2010).

Throughout Europe today, in addition to low levels of education, another common distinctive feature of the various Gypsy “tribes” is their pronatalist, early marriage endogamous tradition, which obviously has helped Gypsies so far to survive and leave descendants, retaining their group uniqueness at the same time. According to the recent studies, the Serbian Gypsy population averages an infant mortality rate around 10% (Čvorović et al. 2008, Čvorović 2004). In the Gypsy communities, most of girls/women start sexual life early and enter arranged, endogamous marriages at an early age. These arranged unions are negotiated by the families involved, and customarily, the Gypsy girls/women have little or no saying regarding this matter. For instance, in rural areas of Mačva, western Serbia, there is an apparent distinction between Gypsies themselves, based on how strictly families or individuals maintain the old norm and distinctions (Čvorović 2010). Even when this practice is not clearly visible, like in places where Gypsies largely adapted behavior norms of the majority, many Gypsies managed to enforce a social separation from non-Gypsies. This is confirmed by the data from

the Mačva village of Cock,¹ inhabited by a Gurbeti Gypsy group. In the past, these Gypsies used to be basket-makers; until the 1990’s wars, they used to travel all over the former Yugoslavia and sell/trade their products. Legal and illegal trade and smuggling of cows, pigs and chicken was also a successful occupation at the time. There around 450 Gypsy residents, the number seasonally fluctuating. The average number of individuals in the Gypsy household is 8. Most of them scramble to survive: they do a little trading, work for Serbs on the land during the season or wait for help from their relatives who live in Austria. Most marriages are arranged endogamously, with over 70% being non-registered with the officials. Divorce/separation is frequent, in spite of the 4.70 average number of children per family. Most girls/women got married early: the average age of the first pregnancy

¹ The real name withhold, at the request of the informants.

is 15.05. It is common that a woman becomes a mother and grandmother at the same time. It is clear that the education of girls has a lower priority: 76% of the interviewed women (149) never completed elementary school. Almost 67% of these stated early marriage as the reason why they have abandoned school. At the same time, infant mortality (expressed as the mean child mortality index: number of dead children per 100 living children) remains high: on average, every other woman experienced the loss of at least one infant (49%); furthermore, 75% experienced either child death or stillbirth, the youngest and the oldest being the most represented. The average woman in this community has around 10 pregnancies. All the child deaths occurred in the first year of life, the majority of mothers blaming local witches/supernatural afflictions. Another study of the three large Gypsy communities reveals infant mortality rate of almost 10%; local witches again appear as the cause of death in most cases (Čvorović et al. 2008).

These data are supported by the findings of the much larger survey on Gypsy health status by Oxfam and the Belgrade Institute for health protection (2003). The study included around 7000 Gypsies from the several Serbian towns. The survey shows that there are usually six children in a family but very often even more. As for marriage and family, the data show that Gypsy population enters marriage at an early age: most marry at age 16–20. By the time they reach 20 years of age, almost half of men and more than 2/3 of women (69.3%) will have already been married (Oxfam 2003, 5). Also, almost half of the Gypsy women surveyed (48,1%) had their first child between ages 16–20. When it comes to sexual relations, 97% of the surveyed do not use any contraception. The survey also stresses unusually high percentage of infant and child mortality: half of the children die during the first and second years of their lives (Oxfam 2003, 15). According to the respondents, 52.0% of these children died of an unknown cause.

In this Mačva village, and probably among the general Gypsy population, a certain level of infant mortality is “expected” and apparently there may be under-investment in some children manifested in their care, feeding, and response to their illnesses. Among Gypsies, the younger the child, the less impact its death seems to have. This may reveal an unconscious set of behaviors of the mother that reflects her traditions. The loss of children is so common in the general Gypsy population that probably every woman grows up with the knowledge that she will lose children. In some societies, infant mortality may be an unconscious or even an overt way of attaining a given family size. When this occurs, health and government officials are puzzled at the underutilization of child health services (Oxfam 2003) often accompanied by an underutilization of family planning services as well. When a certain level of infant mortality is “expected” or when a child is unwanted, there may be under-investment (an unconscious set of behavior of the mother) in some children that is manifested in their care, feeding, and the response to their illnesses. Some mortality may occur when an infant is relatively unwanted whether because of its high birth order, closed spacing of births, the number of living children already in the family, or the child’s sex preference by the family, or because the child is difficult – physically unattractive, or otherwise less acceptable. In this particular Gypsy community, the neglect may be facilitated by cultural norms about child care

– the loss of children is so common that every woman grows up with the certain knowledge that she will lose at least one child. There is acceptance of high rates of infant mortality and accompanying lack of a felt need to take measures to save a child's life. High fertility may be accompanied by the acceptance or even unconscious encouragement of high mortality. On the other hand, in this sample, the mother's young age is positively correlated with the child mortality index and juvenile marriage. Teenage/adolescent pregnancies should become a public health issue because of their observed negative effects on perinatal outcomes and long-term morbidity. These pregnancies often lead to low birth weight which is associated with infant and childhood disorders and a high rate of infant mortality (Reichman and Pagnini 1997, Makinson 1985, Rothenberg and Varga 1981). In addition, educational failure, poverty, unemployment and low self-esteem are understood to be negative outcomes of early childbearing (Maynard 1996). On the other hand, these circumstances also contribute to the likelihood of teen pregnancy. All these features characterize the general Gypsy reproductive strategy (Bereczkei 1993).

In the Cock local Gypsy culture, the custom of juvenile arranged marriage is culturally self-sustained. Girls' marriages are arranged endogamously at an early age, to ensure virginity and chastity, while high fertility appears as a social and gender obligation. From human rights perspective, Gypsy girls are being denied the right to choose whom and when, if at all, to marry in majority of cases (Timmerman 2004). At the same time, the Gypsy community itself openly encourages and promotes juvenile arranged marriage as a means of cultural and social maintenance and self-sufficiency. Choice of marriageable partner is traditionally limited in an effort to enhance kinship and group solidarity (Čvorović 2010). On the other hand, Gypsies who marry outsiders may experience a form of ostracism and a struggle for family/community acceptance. This is how a male Gypsy informant explains the practice:

Gypsies do marry young, too young. My father married when he was 12 years of age. My wife had 13 years when I married her. Girls used to be married at 13 years of age. 14 years of age was considered too old – for it was assumed that she sinned [engage in sexual intercourse] by that age. If she is a female, she must have sinned by that age. When I married my wife, she was a girl/virgin; for if she wasn't, she would be sent home, back to her parents. That was really a disgrace for the whole family. It was a great law among Gypsies, and that's why we get married so young: so that the girls don't fall along the road.

Besides to possible human rights violations associated with the practice of arranged marriages itself, many Gypsy marriages carry unwritten but firm marital rules and disturbing gender-based traditional roles which also potentially add to human rights violations (Timmerman 2004, Savic 2001). Many Gypsy girls, before even finishing puberty, are being hand over to their husbands. At the same time, their mothers continue having children – meaning that mothers and daughters, as well as daughters in law are often simultaneously pregnant. A female Gypsy aged woman, with five living children comments:

I have two sons: my first one was born in 1963, and the other one in 1965. I am very proud of my children – they are grown up people today, my oldest son already has grandchildren! So, from him, I have two grand-granddaughters, wonderful little girls. They are my grandson's daughters; my grandson got married when he was 14 years old.

This however, is not a unique feature of the Gypsy culture: in cases of acute poverty, high mortality, and unpredictable future, individuals may adopt the pattern of accelerated reproduction (Scheper-Hughes 1998). On the other hand, reproduction, according to an evolutionary approach, should only be suppressed under poor conditions when those conditions are likely to improve in the foreseeable future (Wasser and Place 2001,142). For example, if females suppressed reproduction under poor conditions that were unlikely to improve, they would never produce any offspring. For the majority of Gypsy girls, circumstances are not about to improve in the near future, even if they do postpone pregnancy into their twenties. Several of the interviewed women expressed they would prefer having fewer children, if they could choose. As it turns out, many husbands refuse to use contraceptives, their attitude reflecting low bargaining power on the part of women. On the other hand, many girls seemed almost indifferent, expressed in the words of one Gypsy girl/ teen: “Why should I wait? It’s not like someone [something better] is coming my way”.

Due to the young age of the partners, these early marriages cannot be registered in a civil ceremony, under the jurisdiction of the state. Customarily, the civil registration takes place after the couple had been together for a few years and had produced a child. Moreover, many Gypsy women encounter inflexible gender role and double standard regarding chastity, infertility and infidelity. For many Gypsy unions, the ultimate goal is maximized reproduction (Čvorović 2004), hence it is tolerable for a husband to abandon his wife if she fails to reproduce, regardless of the true reason. So, many times, Gypsy culture approves of this conduct and, on the other hand, blames the wife for failing to produce babies (Sutherland 1992). According to the informants from Gypsy Mačva villages, a woman’s highest value is her reproductive capacity. If a woman bears many children, she is respected and rated well; if, on the other hand, she does not produce babies, she is chased off and returned to her parents. In a case like this, the young girl/woman is being deprived of her initial choice of partner, and additionally, she is being left materially limited once more: the declining status of the girl entails she will be seen as “second hand” good (Timmerman 2004, 483). An elderly male informant, with four marriages behind, states:

I had four marriages so far! I married a singer, the first time, when I was 16 years old. Oh, how lovely she was! I married her so we could be [sleep] together. However, she was a road-house singer, and you know how these women have to act. I couldn’t stand other men touching her, when she was performing, so I chased her out. That marriage lasted for about a year. Then, I brought another wife; we lived together for four years but she couldn’t have children. So I chased out that one too. My third wife had very fragile health, and we didn’t have

children, so I sent her off after some time. Finally, I married for the fourth time, she was seven years younger than I was – she was 13 at the time, and I was 20 years old. We've been together for only 3 months, and I had to go to serve in the Army. After several months I heard that she is pregnant. After we had our first son, this fourth marriage became a “real” one – registered with the authorities and everything. We are married now for some 40 years.

For Gypsy women and their children, living in these unregistered unions, may bring legal consequences in addition to hardships provoked by rigid patriarchal order, present in many local Gypsy cultures (Timmerman 2004, Uzunova 2010). Throughout their lives, these women/girls are exposed to different forms of exclusion, including limited access to schooling, health and family planning. According to the female Gypsy informants from the village of Cock, women in general have little or decisions regarding their lives and future. When it comes to the family violence, almost half of the female informants reported that their husbands have beaten them up more than once, while the younger women reported more and recent beatings than the older ones. In addition, threats by their husbands (yelling and threats of physical violence) are experienced by almost 80% of these Gypsy women. Within their homes, verbal intimidation by the husbands includes threats to divorce/abandon the wife, to remarry, or to take the children away if she does not behave appropriately. Several male informants, argued that sometimes, a wife, especially if she is a young inexperienced bride, “deserves” spanking, when she is disobeying or misbehaving in some other way. After marriage, many of these women are expected to remain under the authority of their husband's family, especially mother-in-laws. In general, they have little to say in domestic decisions, and about the only means to enhance their status and confirm themselves as individuals is their fertility. One eighteen year old, recently married girl, a mother of two small children, explained: “That is what we ought to do. I went to school for only several grades, and got married. My husband would never allow me to work outside [this community]. I cannot go out – I'm married now. I have my kids to keep me busy so now I don't think about other things”.

The custom of juvenile marriages and child brides are not restricted to Gypsy cultures, though. According to a UNICEF (2009) report, more than a third of the world's child brides are from India, exposing children to an increased risk of exploitation in spite the country's growing modernity and economic wealth. Also, children in India, Nepal and Pakistan may be engaged or even married before age 10. Early, arranged juvenile marriages could have severe consequences on reproductive health and development, education, and a general well being of the individuals involved, especially girls. The report stressed that in general, arranged juvenile marriage results in loss of adolescence, imposed sexual relations, and abrupt individual development. Sex within juvenile marriage could not be treated as consensual due to the young age and developmental phase; in addition, very few young brides have access to contraceptives, while many suffer from higher susceptibility to STDs, and pregnancy related diseases. What is more important is that deaths are up to 200 percent higher than in an older sampling of mothers aged 20-24, while in-

fant mortality rates are considerably higher regardless of the local economies. Finally, juvenile arranged marriage results in denial of education, meaning that girls are left with no qualifications: “Poor, malnourished, uneducated girls grow up to become poor, uneducated, malnourished mothers who give birth to underweight babies; mothers who lack access to crucial information; mothers who are unable to support their own children in the learning process” (Timmerman 2004, 496).

The custom of arranged juvenile marriage/child brides is better understood when considering its function: for centuries, the Gypsy traditional, endogamously arranged marriage ensured that every male obtained a wife at the beginning of her reproductive years, while the girls obligatory virginity affirmed paternal confidence. This pattern is consistent throughout Europe (Čvorović 2004). Since their first appearance in the Balkans centuries ago, Gypsies main concern was how to survive and outwit obstacles in life, which included persecution, enslavement and harassment. The marriage practice and reproductive strategy that Gypsies employed might be the answer to life conditions they met and still live in. Their endogamous and reproductive practices, including high fertility, have helped Gypsies in the past to leave descendants. This particular tradition was, for Gypsies, an inheritable and replicable trait, which tended to increase in frequency along with the descendants. Maintaining ethnic distinctiveness, including patterns of sexual and reproductive behavior, function to regulate competing population’s access to resources, and the recognition that in one case the proximate causes of behavior may be largely inherited while in the other they may be primarily learned should not rule out the possibility that the selective pressures in both cases may be the same (Abruzzi 1982). Hence, child bride/arranged juvenile marriage is a successful cultural practice aimed at maintaining and regulating social and reproductive behavior, before youngsters have the chance to choose a different way of life. Transmitted generation to generation, these patterns testify to the power of Gypsy traditions, at the cost to the women themselves: the economic and social dependency of Gypsy women, their jeopardized reproductive health and mortality of their infants are a by-product of this successful strategy.

Deep social changes are needed for Gypsies to become integrated into modern European society. Gypsies’ cultural and economic development and the prevention of discrimination against them will only be successful if their traditions are better understood. The lack of strong Gypsy identity and leadership are obstacles on the path leading to an effective integration, but they appear weak in comparison to the obstacle of the public’s negative understanding of Gypsy tradition and culture and the apparent refusal of Gypsies themselves to take responsibility for internal human rights issues or to accept certain social obligations (Uzunova 2010). Gypsy communities need increased efforts to improve standard of living, education and health, but these aspirations are unlikely to succeed unless some deep changes emerge within Gypsy culture itself (Čvorović 2004, Timmerman 2004). The “Gypsy problem”, their high rates of teenage pregnancy, large number of children, unemployment or delinquency cannot be solved only by advice-giving work or humanitarian benefits, since many key determinants of their behavior are not changed in this way. Every host state must take measures in order to fully comply with interna-

tional standards regarding Gypsy minority, but the fact remains that the custom of child bride/endogamous juvenile marriage, high fertility and Gypsy “tribalism” evoke counter-tribalism, and cooperation and improvement could only be reached after an increased civic responsibility materialize among Gypsy individuals and groups:

Roma rights . . . are undermined by efforts by prominent Roma to deny legitimacy to the idea that there may be particular human rights issues arising from and in Romani communities. Roma rights advances are cut short, frustrated and reduced by a discourse which seeks justice on the one hand, but argues for exemption from culpability on the other (Claude Cahn 2007, 7).

Conclusion

The tribe/group, with its own endogamous professional-group organization was the primary social unit of the Gypsies for centuries. Their ethnicity was maintained by the rules based on tradition and endogamy, and their survival was made possible by the reproductive strategies they employed. Only the recent political and economic changes have led Gypsies ceasing to practice their original professions, accompanied by the weakening of traditional rules and endogamy.

In Europe, the poor conditions of Gypsy women – their living conditions, education, income and future prospects in general – are unlikely to improve, based on their long-term past. The selection for the Gypsy traditions can account for the widespread existence of their reproductive behavior. Consequently Gypsy endogamy practice preserved traditions, but at the cost of cooperation with outsiders.

In Serbia, the Gypsy population tends to suffer disproportionately from higher rates of poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, and disease. At the same time, the Serbian Gypsy women average an infant mortality rate above 10%. For most of these girls/women, endogamous, arranged marriages are negotiated at an early age, usually without their consent. Among these women, a certain level of infant mortality is “expected”, following an under-investment in some children manifested in their care, feeding, and the response to their illnesses. Adolescent/teen parenthood is associated with infant mortality, childhood illness, welfare dependence, academic failure, juvenile crime, and teen parenthood in generations to follow (Rich-Edwards 2002). No doubt that the Gypsy poverty, isolation and prejudice against them contribute to their short life expectancy and infant mortality. However, the Gypsy culture in itself can sometimes increase risk and add to the present-day situation they are faced with. Hence, there are some features of Gypsy culture that appear inflexible and unreceptive to integration. Group and social segregation can be carried to extremes such as refusal to register births and deaths, so that important trends in morbidity and mortality may be hidden (Save the Children 2001). Their segregation also results in lower participation in health screening in general.

Under the present circumstances, it remains an open question if it would make little, if any, difference to Gypsy teen mothers if they were to wait a few

years. In the face of deplorable socio-economic conditions and gloomy future prospects, it makes sense for disadvantaged women to bear their children in their teens (Geronimus 1996). The Gypsy data reveal a society in which many young people face prospects so depressing that the conventional credentials of adulthood, a high school degree and a job, seem nearly worthless: “Where there is no opportunity, there is no cost to early parenthood” (Rich-Edwards 2002, 556).

Gypsy youth need real local opportunities as a motivation to delay teen parenthood. The host states must create environments in which opportunities are available to them, and at the same time, Gypsies themselves need to demonstrate “increased civic responsibility” (Cahn 2007), by eliminating in the first place, juvenile marriages. Worldwide, the rude data show that teen mothers need opportunities and tools to escape poverty while self-selection will prevent teen pregnancy where such opportunities and tools arise (Rich-Edwards 2002). Unless this comes to pass, equal opportunity will remain a polite national fiction.

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Јелена Чворовић

Јувенилни бракови, дечје невесте и смртност деце код српских Рома

Према извештају УНДП-а (UNDP) из 2006, Роми који живе на територији Европе изложени су различитим врстама дискриминације, друштвено и географски су изоловани, животни век им је у просеку нижи за 10–15 година у поређењу са осталим популацијама, и још увек имају високу стопу смртности деце. Стопа незапослености достиже и до 80%. Једном речју, Роми у Европи живе у изразитој сегрегацији, што се може рећи и за Роме у Србији. Како интегрисати Роме у модерно европско друштво представља горући проблем. И поред напора различитих институција, влада, организација и активиста да се положај Рома поправи, скоро сви напори остају на бази покушаја и реторике, јер се главним препрекама успешне интеграције нико и не бави- а то су друштвени антагонизам између Рома и не-Рома и одређени елементи саме ромске културе који подстичу и одржавају сегрегацију и етноцентризам.

Кључне речи:

јувенилни брак,
морталитет деце,
Роми, Србија

Према најновијим подацима, око 80% Рома у Србији функционално је неписмено, а само 8% завршило је основну школу (Бета, 14. Октобар 2010). Велики број ромских девојчица између 13–16 година прекида школовање зарад удаје.

Поред ниског социо-економског положаја и демографских особина, европски Роми и поред свих језичких и историјских различитости имају још једну заједничку особину, а то је пронаталистичка, ендегамна традиција раних бракова, која је очигледно помогла Ромима да преживе у вековима недаћа, и да оставе потомство, одржавајући у исто време и етницитет. У Србији, према најновијим студијама, општа популација Рома има велику стопу смртности одојчади, око 10% (Čvorović et al. 2008, Čvorović 2004). У оквиру ромских насеља, већина девојчица почиње сексуално-репродуктивни живот рано, у браковима који су ендегамни и обично уговорени између породица. Добар пример овог шаблона представља једно типично мачванско село, са око 450

Рома који су у њему стално насељени. У прошлости су били корпари, и пре ратова из 90-их путовали су по читавој бившој Југославији, тргујући са својим производима. Шверц је такође био уносно занимање – шверц стоке, цигарета, кућне хемије итд. Данас тешко живе, једва састављају крај с крајем, већина их је без сталног запослења, ослањају се на помоћ рођака из Аустрије и раде сезонске послове. У оквиру ове ромске групе, просечан број чланова породице је 8, већина бракова је уговорена, а око 70% их није званично регистровано. Развод/сепарација и промене партнера су честе, и поред 4.70 деце по кући/породици. Већина девојчица је искусила рану удају: просечна година прве трудноће је 15.05, па је честа је појава да жена постане мајка и баба у исто време. Јасно је да едукација девојчица има низак приоритет: око 76% њих није завршило основну школу (од 149 у узорку). Готово 67% испитаница је изјавило да их је рана удаја спречила да наставе школовање. У исто време, морталитет одојчади (изражен као средњи индекс морталитета одојчади: број умрле деце/одојчади на 100 преживеле деце) је велики. У просеку, готово 49% испитаних жена доживело је смрт најмање једног детета узраста до 1 године живота, односно свака друга жена. Њих 75% искусило је смрт детета или случај мртво-рођеног. У овој групи, најзаступљеније су најмлађе и најстарије испитанице. Просечна жена у овом насељу има 10 трудноћа у току живота. Сва деца/одојчад која су умрла, умрла су у току прве године живота, и велика већина мајки њихову смрт приписује деловању локалних вештица.

Једно велико, званично истраживање здравља Рома потврђује ове микро податке: Oxfam и Завод за заштиту здравља објавили су 2003. податке о здравственом стању преко 7.000 Рома из различитих крајева Србије, и окарактерисали стање ствари као катастрофално. У овом узорку има преко шесторо деце по породици; удаја је рана а фертилитет велики, већина је ступила у брак око 15–16. године. До двадесете године, половина испитаних мушкараца и више од 2/3 жена (70%) је већ било једном у брачној/ванбрачној заједници. (Oxfam 2003, 5). 97% испитаника није користило никакву контрацепцију. Извештај потврђује и велику стопу смртности деце: половина рођене деце умре у току прве и друге године живота (Oxfam 2003, 15), већином од непознатог узрока (52%).

У поменутом мачванском селу, а вероватно и на нивоу опште популације Рома, одређени ниво морталитета деце је очекиван, и могуће је да је реч о недовољном улагању у неку децу, што се манифестује у начину неге, храњења, односу према болести... У овом узорку, што је дете било млађе, то је његова смрт имала мањи утицај на мајку. Ово може да указује на несвесни образац понашања мајке, који је одраз њене традиције. Губитак деце је тако чест у општој популацији Рома, да вероватно свака жена одрасте са уверењем да ће и она искусити смрт најмање једног детета. У неким културама, смрт одојчади може бити несвесни или чак и намерни начин достизања оптималног броја деце у породици. Роми не користе здравствене службе чак и када су бесплатне и доступне, што се нарочито односи на планирање породице и вакцинацију деце. Када је одређени ниво морталитета деце очекиван, или када је дете нежељено, може да се јави запостављање одређене деце или детета. У

овој локалној ромској култури, запостављање је олакшано културним нормама које се тичу неге деце – губитак и смртност деце су тако чести да свака девојчица/жена прихвата као норму очекивање да ће и она искусити смрт најмање једног детета. Значи, у оквиру ове културе, постоји прихватање велике стопе смртности деце и недостатак потребе да се направе неопходни кораци да се спасе дететов живот. Висок фертилитет тако бива праћен прихватањем или чак несвесним подстицањем високе стопе смртности. С друге стране, у овом узорку, године мајке су у позитивној корелацији са индексом морталитета деце и јувенилним/раним браком. Трудноће адолесцената/тинејџера треба да постану предмет посебне пажње због њихових уочених негативних последица на перинатални исход и морбидитет. Ране трудноће врло често имају за последицу малу тежину детета на рођењу, која је повезана са поремећајима у расту, развоју и смртношћу одојчади (Reichman and Pagnini 1997, Makinson 1985, Rothenberg and Varga 1981). Поред тога, неуспех у образовању, незапосленост и ниско самопоштовање јесу очекиване последице прераног родитељства (Maunart 1996). Ове околности, пак, додатно утичу на могућност адолесцентне трудноће, а све ово карактерише општу репродуктивну стратегију Рома (Bereczkei 1993).

У овој мачванској, локалној ромској култури, обичај јувенилног брака/ дечјих невести је културно самоодржив. Девојчице ступају у ране, уговорене бракове да би се осигурало нетакнуто девичанство, док висок фертилитет представља друштвену и полну обавезу. Из перспективе људских права, ромским девојчицама је одузето право да изабере за кога ће се и када, ако и уопште, удати (Timmerman 2004). Истовремено, локална заједница отворено подржава и промовише јувенилне уговорене бракове, као начин културног и друштвеног одржања и само-довољности. Избор брачног партнера је традиционално лимитиран у покушају да се ојача родбинска и групна солидарност. Многе ромске девојчице, и пре завршетка пубертета, бивају предате мужу и његовој породици, док истовремено, њихове мајке настављају да рађају децу – што значи да су мајке и кћерке често истовремено трудне.

Ово ипак није карактеристично само за ромску културу: у случајевима акутног сиромаштва, високе смртности и непредвидиве будућности, појединци и групе могу прихватити модел убрзане репродукције (Scheper-Hughes 1998). Према еволуционој перспективи, у сиромашним условима живота репродукција ће бити потиснута ако постоји пројекција да ће се ти услови поправити у скоријој будућности (Wasser and Place 2001,142). На пример, када би женке/жене потиснуле репродукцију у сиромашним условима, који се неће ускоро поправити, оне не би имале никакво потомство. За већину ромских девојчица, околности не изгледају склоне променама у скоријој будућности, чак и када би оне одложиле трудноћу до своје двадесете године. Неколико интервјуисаних жена изразило је жељу да има мање деце - када би могле да бирају. Како се испоставило, већина мужева се противи коришћењу контрацепције, што говори о ниском нивоу компромиса у односима мушко-женско. С друге стране, многе младе жене/девојчице

деловале су потпуно индиферентно, што се може илустровати речима ове тинејџерке: „А што да чекам? Као да ме неко други [нешто друго] чека иза улга!“

Због младих година партнера, јувенилни ромски бракови обично и нису регистровани у грађанском смислу, што опет може имати последице за жену и њену децу. Бракови који јесу регистровани, регистровани су тек после неколико година заједничког живота (и неколико потомака). Уколико нема потомства, често се дешава да се жена/девојчица враћа родитељима, где чека на други брак, али се и третира као половна роба. Према речима мештана из овог мачванског села, највећа вредност једне жене јесте њен репродуктивни капацитет – ако има много деце, она је поштована и вреднована као жена и мајка. Насиље у породици је честа појава у јувенилним браковима: многи мушкарци су изјавили да младе невесте/дечје невесте некада заслужују „мало батина“, да схвате свој положај и коригују своје понашање. Скоро половина жена је изјавила да је доживела физичко насиље од стране својих партнера, и то млађе жене чешће него старије; изложене су психолошким пристицима и претњама, скоро 80% њих. У оквиру брачне заједнице, вербална застрашивања укључују претње да ће их муж оставити и одвести децу уколико се не понашају како треба. Ауторитет мужа и свекрве је нешто што “мора” да се поштује, и готово једини начин да ове девојчице поправе свој положај и потврде себе као женска бића – јесте фертилитет.

Обичај дечјих невести/јувенилног брака није ограничен само на ромску културу. Према подацима UNICEF-а из 2009 године, више од 1/3 дечјих невести потиче из Индије, при чему се деца излажу ризику експлоатације упркос расту и развоју земље. Деца у Индији се вере или венчавају и пре десете године живота. Овакви рани бракови имају озбиљне последице по репродуктивно здравље и развој, и опште стање нарочито девојчица. Ови бракови имају за последицу губљење и прекидање нормалног животног циклуса – адолесценције, наметнуте сексуалне односе и нагло сазревање. Секс у оквиру оваквих заједница се не може третирати као споразуман због младих година учесника; врло мало дечјих невести има проступа контрацепцији, а многе задобију сексуално преносиве болести. Што је још значајније, смртни случајеви су до 200 процената виши него у узорку мајки од 20–24. године. Такође, смртност одојчади је значајно већа, без обзира на животне услове и економију. Јувенилни бракови спречавају даље образовање и школовање, што значи да ове девојчице остају без икаквих квалификација.

Овај обичај се може посматрати и са друге стране када се разуме његова права функција. Вековима, ромски традиционални, ендогамни и уговорени бракови девојчица осигуравали су да сваки мушкарац добије жену на почетку њених репродуктивних година. Овакав модел је присутан у читавој Европи. Од њиховог првог појављивања на Балкану пре више векова, главна брига Рома била је како преживети и надмудрити животне препреке, које су укључивале прогоне, дискриминацију, робовање итд. Историја Рома је историја прогона једног народа. Обичај јувенилног брака/дечје невесте и

репродуктивне стратегије високог фертилитета Рома само су одговор на услове живота који су Роми затекли и у којима још увек живе. Ромски ендогамни бракови и висок фертилитет су помогли Ромима да преживе и оставе потомке. Ова традиција је за Роме била наследна карактеристика, која се понављала и повећавала сразмерно са преживелим потомцима. Одржање етничке различитости, укључујући моделе сексуалног и репродуктивног понашања, има функцију да регулише популације које се такмиче за ресурсе - у једном случају проксимални узроци понашања могу да буду наследни, а у другом научени, што не искључује могућност да су селективни притисци у оба случаја били исти (Abruzi 1982). И тако, јуvenilни брак је врло успешна културна пракса са циљем одржања и регулисања социјалног и репродуктивног понашања, пре него што млади људи добију шансу да изаберу другачији начин живота. Преношена из генерације у генерацију, пракса јуvenilног брака, сведочи о снази ромске традиције, али на рачун ромске жене: економска и друштвена зависност ромских жена, њихово угрожено репродуктивно здравље и смртност њихове деце су само нус – последице једне успешне стратегије преживљавања.

Потребне су дубоке социјалне промене да би се Роми успешно укључили у модерно друштво. Њихов економски и културни напредак и превенција дискриминације према њима биће успешни само ако се њихова традиција боље упозна и разуме. Недостатак идентитета и вођства јесу препреке на овом путу, али ипак бледе у поређењу са препрекама које представљају друштвено неразумевање и негативно вредновање ромске културе. С друге стране, постоји очито одбијање самих Рома да преузму одговорност за сопствене културне праксе и да прихвате одређене друштвене одговорности (Uzunova 2010). Ромским заједницама потребни су удружени и појачани напори да се поправе услови живота и приступ школству, али ове тежње неће успети уколико се не десе неке дубоке унутрашње промене у самој ромској култури. Свака земља мора да се повинује стандардима и законима о поштовању људских права у односу на Роме, али остаје чињеница да обичаји дечје невесте/јуvenilног брака, уговорених бракова, високог фертилитета и одређеног племенског обрасца понашања, изазивају отпор већинског становништва, а сарадња и побољшање могу се постићи само подизањем свести о грађанској одговорности код самих Рома:

Права Рома (...) су подривена деловањем значајних представника Рома који поричу основаност идеје да постоје одређена људска права која су унутар ромских заједница угрожена. Због тога су права Рома умањена, захваљујући дискурсу који на једној страни тражи правду, а на другој тражи изузеће од одговорности (Claude Cahn 2007, 7).

У Европи, услови у којима живи већина ромских жена, њихово сиромаштво, недостатак образовања и неповољни изгледи за будућност- не делује као да ће се побољшати у скорије време. Селекција за одабир ромских традиција може да објасни постојање овакве репродуктивне стратегије.

Сходно томе, ендогамија је сачувала традицију, али на рачун/штету сарадње са не-Ромима.

Под овим условима остаје отворено питање да ли би потискивање репродукције за неколико година имало било какав значај за ове тинејџерске мајке. У изразито лошим социо-економским условима и пред будућношћу која личи на садашњост, има смисла да сиромашне тинејџерке постану мајке (Geropimus 1996). Подаци сведоче о ромском друштву у коме многи млади људи немају никакву будућност и где конвенционална достигнућа одраслог доба, као што су диплома средње школе, сталан посао и плата, изгледају скоро бесмислени: „Када не постоје могућности за добар живот, нема ни цене која се плаћа за рано родитељство“ (Rich-Edwards 2002, 556).

Да би ромска младеж потиснула рану репродукцију, потребне су им могућности унутар локалног окружења. Свака земља домаћин мора да створи животне услове који ће омогућити једнаке шансе за све, а истовремено, Роми морају да искажу повећану грађанску одговорност, што се пре свега односи на јувенилне бракове и положај жене. Широм света, подаци указују на то да су мајкама-тинејџеркама потребне могућности и оруђа да избегну сиромаштво, док ће ауто-селекција спречити трудноће тамо где услови постоје. Уколико се ово не деси, једнаке шансе за све остаће само на нивоу реторике.